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ABSTRACT

Suggestions are made for creating healthy working relationships within a college administration and for improving the administrator's ability to cope with college politics. After introductory material examining the difficulty some educators, especially women, experience in utilizing power and politics to achieve desired goals, the report discusses five assumptions concerning the college workplace: (1) work relationships consist of implicit or explicit contracts; (2) conflicts arise due to the needs and feelings of co-workers; (3) administrative work involves the use of power; (4) power in colleges is distributed among groups and individuals; and (5) political maneuvering is an ongoing phenomenon caused by the scarcity of resources. The report then examines several conflict situations which detract from the administrator's power, competence, and credibility. These conflicts involve personality disputes; gossip; stress related to changes in staff, resources, priorities, or procedures; alliances or cliques; and impasses caused by inattention to identified problems. Conditions for healthy working relationships are then outlined, including the clear definition of roles and objectives, good communications, and respect for professional ethics. The report concludes with a description of problem-solving techniques to be used in resolving conflicts. (JP)

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WORKING TOGETHER: COPING WITH COLLEGE POLITICS

by

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Introduction

As Richard Bach said in Illusions, "We teach what we most need to learn." When I was in graduate school, I needed to learn the theory and practice of Higher Education. So I did. When I got my first Associate Dean position, I needed to learn how to manage people and programs and dollars. I read and taught management theory and assertiveness. And I learned by doing. But the more I worked in the system, and especially when I moved into a Dean's level position, I found that even when I managed beautifully, there were mysterious forces at work which blocked my budget proposals. Even when I presented logical justifications and data to support my positions, they were sometimes dismissed as low priorities. I found long-standing resentment of Student Services by the faculty Senate. I watched attacks and defenses unfolding, despite attempts at teamwork. The most dismaying part of these revelations was that they sometimes happened within those groups that most needed to be a cooperative unit - the beleaguered Nontraditional Student Organization, the Women's Center, tne new coalition to bring performing arts to the campus, etc. My support groups! Instead of putting our energies into implementing great and noble programs, we were huddled in small groups, discussing so-and-so's obnoxious behavior. And confidentiality went out the window! Another blow! Donald Walker's book, The Effective Administrator, contains a quip on confidentiality in a university. "Confidentiality means something that you discuss with one person at a time." [1] I began crossing a lot of people off my list of confidantes. Like most women, I felt that power was a scary thing, that people played fair and played by the rules, and that if I did well, I'd be rewarded. If there was conflict, I took it personally, and was extremely uncomfortable with publicly disagreeing with anyone. Many men around me relished fights and plotted to extend their influence. I couldn't understand this.

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[1]Walker, Donald E., The Effective Administrator (San Francisco Jossey-Bass, 1979), p. 52.

Hennings and Jardim pointed out that these responses are common among women moving into corporate settings, and they attribute it partly to the differences in socializing males and females.

They point out the lessons learned from team contact sports.

- Winning is important; competition is good
- If they hit hard, it's part of the game
- Get up if you're down
- Don't cry
- Practice, practice, practice
- Have a strategy
- Play with each other, even if you can't stand the center, the quarterback can't function without him, and the rest of you
- Be tough

This training is perpetuated in the army, in men's service organizations, and in many other institutuions, most of which are controlled by males who take these ground rules for granted. Men are not accustomed to working with women as true equals, especially in management.

Now that I've been doing some workshops out in the northwest, I find that power and politics are topics of great interest, especially among groups of employed women. It turns out that we all have experienced the ill effects of "politics." But few of us have really understood the positive aspects of the political nature of colleges, nor have we learned to use the skills that we need when assertiveness just isn't enough.

This paper will explore the kinds of problems that seem to arise because of college politics. It will look at conflict and how it can be both positive and negative. And it will propose some conditions for healthy working relationships and some ways to restore those conditions when they have disappeared.

Assumptions

1) College politics involves people working with each other in professional relationships. All relationships consist of an explicit or implicit contract which determines the kinds of interactions they have. These relationships are supposed to be structured so that institutional goals are pursued. But underneath the formal activities and the rational discussions are very personal agendas, and group pressures, and subconscious motivations.

2) Since human beings are involved in these relationships, there are needs and feelings which constantly arise. Conflicts in relationships tend to originate when there are strong feelings and legitimate needs, and sometimes the needs are not met, and sometimes the feelings are not expressed in appropriate ways. Therefore, when we explore ways to cope with college politics, we're focusing on individuals who have human needs and feelings, as well as the roles they play as professionals trying to exert power and influence.

3) Professional relationships involve the use of power. Power is the ability to get things done, to mobilize resources, to get or to do what is necessary to achieve the goal. It involves working with or through other people. It involves controlling behavior, role-playing, making requests, compromising, and using strategy. Indeed, that's one dictionary definition of "politics": "The use of intrigue or strategy in obtaining any position of power and control." In order to play this game, we must have a strategy or a plan, or at least some principles to guide our choice of action. The plan must involve some interpersonal skills, and conscious efforts to seek the alternatives to "fight or flight" impulses.

4) Power in colleges is distribured among groups and individuals. According to Don Walker, there is a distrust in concentrated power, an insistance on consent rather than obedience, and a concern for ethics and morality, and for for the rights of individuals.[2] It might have gone underground but it's there. A college is not like a corporation. It is more democratic more committed to ideals and service, and more fragmented in its distribution of power among administrators, faculty, staff, and students. Therefore, communication is critically important. It is central to getting consensus, building cooperative efforts, and neutralizing conflicts.

5) Since there is a scarcity of resources, political maneuvering is an on ongoing fact of life. It is often covert, and often done by people who have not had much experience in using power. We are educators, not politicians, right? So we often feel dismayed and powerless when thrown into the battlefield. Nothing in our graduate school program prepared us for the world that Ann Scott described:

> In the world of academe, scarce resources include such things as academic status, control over budget, and personnel and students, the attention and time of the powerful. Getting published can be a political process. Getting tenure is a political process. Getting a larger share of line positions for your department, a new program funded, a course accepted as a prerequisite are all political processes. Deciding the ground rules under which decisions will be made is a political process. Politics in academe, as elsewhere, consists in exercising power, consolidating power, or effecting a change in power relationships, - or more crudely

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[2]Walker, Donald E., The Effective Administrator (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1979), pp. 9-35.

in working the system to get what you need.[3]

And I would add two more points. First, you cannot effectively work the system if you don't maintain good working relationships with the key people in your college, including the ones you're uncomfortable with. If they don't trust you, respect you, or understand what you're trying to do, you will be essentially powerless. This means talking with them on a regular basis and so that they will support you, hopefully, offering to support them. Secondly, if you are perceived as a political strategist who cares only about increasing your power or territory or staff salaries, you will not be trusted. Political maneuvering should never outweigh your concern for the good of the whole institution or your basic human relations approach to your colleagues. The appearance of how you interact is sometimes more important than your real feelings.

Rosabeth Kantor, who wrote Men and Women of the Corporation, stresses the importance of power, which can get a favorable share of the resources, opportunities, and rewards for the staff, and human relations, which, added to power, produces high morale. She also emphasizes competence. All three of those add up to credibility.

Kantor's study of corporate executives, their secretaries, and their spouses, as well as Henning's and Jardim's research on the career histories of 25 top "managerial women" show that the women who were successful concentrated on competence. They demonstrated their ability first, and built relationships second. Kantor asks how power is acquired. Her answer was twofold:

1) Through performance. But it's not just doing your job well. To increase power, your achievements must be unusual, not the expected or the routine. Rewards go to volunteers and innovators. They must be visible. People

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[3]Scott, Ann, "Management As a Political Process," paper presented at 1974 ACE Convention, quoted in Walker, Don, ibid., p. 201.

have to take notice, or you have to tell them about it. And they must be relevant to college goals, or solve pressing problems.

2) Through alliances. These are relationships with powerful people - supervisors, mentors, advisors, and with peers who have clout, and with supervisees who make the system work.[4] And through building a good network.

Crunch Situations

We all know how to work at being competent. We have to know our job responsibilities, perform them superbly, report to others (directly and indirectly) about our accomplishments, and have a plan for making some innovative things happen. And we know how to cultivate good interpersonal relationships, especially when the atmosphere is warm and congenial. The hard part comes when there's a "crunch" situation. A crunch situation is the root of all conflict and the first step in turning a nurturing environment into a toxic one.

Crunch situations begin with wants and feelings. When you want something from someone -- a new course, more money, a different procedure, less pressure, etc. -- and the other person doesn't want to give it to you, you're in a crunch situation. Or they want you to agree, and you don't agree. The other type of crunch situation is when you have a strong feeling about someone, or they about you. It could be anger, fear, jealousy, love, lust, extreme irritation, etc. Any feeling which triggers the fight-or-flight response, or the need to possess or control. In both those cases, some part of your body goes "crunch," your stomach, your chest, your teeth, or your blood pressure.

It says in the textbooks that all conflict isn't bad. When it is controlled it can serve as a prerequisite to change, generate energy and activity (where before there was only apathy), stimulate interest, curiosity, and ideas, consolidate groups

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[4]Kantor, Rosabeth Moss, Men and Women of the Corporation, (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1977).

and increase loyalty ("circling the wagons"), and result in a reduction of tension ("Whew. Now it's finally out in the open").[5]

However, as we all know, when the conflict gets too strong, when the disagreement leads to attacking and defending, or when the feelings are used to fuel rather than cool antagonisms, then we have an unhealthy situation. It usually disrupts work, gets people into alliance-building activities, and can leave scars that take too long to heal, and so the past hurts are still operating during the budget hearings six months later.

MOST COMMON PROBLEMS

What are the most common problems arising in work settings? Most often mentioned by participants in my workshops are:

(1) Personality Conflicts. They begin with "putdowns." Putdowns are statements which say "You are bad" or "You did something bad." They can be overt putdowns, such as "How could you let this course on Erotic Exercise get into the schedule?" or "You should" statements, such as, "You should have been more cordial to those Iranian demonstrators," or it could be a putdown disguised as a question, such as "Don't you think you've said enough?" or "What kind of fool do you think I am?"

Other examples are:

- sarcasm (hostility expressed humorously)
  "You women's libbers are always looking for ways to take over."
- ridicule - "She got her nose fixed, and now her mouth won't work."
- threatening - "If she wants more racquetball courts, she'll just have to go out and raise the money herself."

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[5]Carisle, Howard M., Management: Concepts and Situations (Chicago: Science Research Associates, Inc., 1976), pp. 436-439.

- overgeneralizing - "Dean Bean just doesn't care about what the faculty think." Putdowns, if perpetuated, lead to avoidance, paranoia, lack of teamwork, competition, defensiveness, and ongoing hostility. When we begin to secretly enjoy the errors of our "enemies," then a political conflict is just an argument away. Often the conflict leads to the second of commonly expressed problems:

(2) Gossip. Gossip is talking about someone who is not present, and who would not be pleased if he/she could hear what you are saying. At its worst, it involves a judgment or a rumor about someone's personal conduct. It qualifies as a problem if it makes matters worse, rather than helps to design a solution, or gains one person an ally at the expense of someone else.

We all need confidantes. The root word, "godsibb," meant godparent. Gossip was something you told to a trusted friend or sibling. It's different when you share information which is sensitive in order to shed light on a genuine solution to someone else's problem, or to "ventilate" feelings in confidence so that you won't poison the atmosphere. But when I hear someone saying, "Did you hear what the idiot said at yesterday's meeting?" I get nervous especially if it's clear that the listeners are gloating. Chances are that sooner or later, it will get back to the gossipee, and if you're associated with spreading the bad word, you lose credibility.

(3) Stresses related to changes in staff, resources, priorities, or procedures. Most living things are homeostatic. They want to return to a state of comfort and regularity. Surprises are exciting sometimes, but they can also be scary. Any change will create stress, and stress leads to fear, overreactions, self-protectiveness, and grumbling. Actions taken too precipitously will be viewed as threatening. Innovations undertaken too enthusiastically will be resisted, ignored, or scuttled. Extra sensitivity is needed whenever change is underway.

(4) Plots, alliances or "In" groups. These involve covert planning by an individual group of people who want to "win" something, or retain control without letting the outsiders have a real chance to get "in." Some people have a need to perpetuate the "oppressed syndrome." They identify themselves as "kept down" or "kept out" and attract followers who are excited by the chance to rebel, but who are more interested in perpetuating the conflict than in using the real power that lies at their fingertips.

(5) Impasses. These occur when requests have been made, problems have been identified, or needs have been expressed, and there appears to be no action. Individuals are quick to be blamed. "My report sat on Dean Bean's desk for six months!" "The Steering Committee hasn't been covened!" "We still have this horrible space problem!" Someone must be blamed.

Impasses also occur when problems are talked to death, or meetings go on interminably with no process identified for moving forward. Pretty soon the quarter ends and the situation festers again next year, if it's serious enough. Conversely, when individuals deliberately delay action, or fail to call together those closest to the problem, the pessimism mounts.

Conditions for Healthy Working Relationships

In order for healthy working relationships to exist, a number of conditions must be present. My theory is that if we can maintain these conditions, and take deliberate steps to restore them when problems arise, then coping with college politics is relatively easy. These five conditions encompass a number of qualities associated with high-achieving teams.

(1) Clear roles and clear goals.

- There is agreement about who is supposed to do what, and how and when they will do it.
- Roles are established to fit the institution's goals.

- Responsibilities are adhered to and priorities are treated as such.
- We are all committed to the goals; if we are not, we make the best case we can, and accept the majority view.
- We understand the working style and value system of our colleagues as individuals, free from stereotypes, and accept the skills that each person brings to the role.

(2) Good Communication.

- Regular and ongoing communication occurs between key people.
- It is clear, specific, appropriate, tactful, and constructive.
- Consultation occurs before taking action which affects others. Everyone who is affected by a decision should have a chance for input.
- Talk is task-oriented when work is in progress.
- It neither minimizes problems nor maximizes disagreements into catastrophes.
- People feel encouraged to express their feelings and ideas without agressiveness or "covering up".

(3) Positive Atmosphere.

- There is mutual respect, support and recognition of accomplishments.
- People trust each other to have benign motives and to do the best they can.
- It's OK to make mistakes, and there is no fear of reprisals. Don Walker says that "The most consistently identifiable contrast between the champ and the bush leaguer. . . is the difference in their attitude concerning revenge." As Woody Allen once said, "You can never get even with the world. It takes too long and there are too many lawyers."[6]
- Professional and personal growth is encouraged, as well as constructive evaluation.

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[6]Walker, Donald E., The Effective Administrator, (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1979), p. 163.

- Tension isn't too high.
- Problems get solved.
- Humor, informality, and celebration is allowed. People have fun working together.

(4) Professional Ethics.

- People work for the good of the whole system, not just their own purposes.
- Fairness and objectivity are consistent.
- Sensitivity and tolerance of differences prevails in an atmosphere of working with each other, not against each other.
- Honesty, authenticity, and credibility are the rule, not manipulation, or exploitation.
- People work reliably and dependably.
- When confidentiality is requested, it is not violated.
- There is due process and orderly personnel and grievance procedures to prevent arbitrary decisions.
- Staff members demonstrate a caring attitude which puts the welfare of others as the highest priority.

(5) Persistence and Compromise

- People keep trying to work things out, and they compromise when necessary.
- Individuals are willing to take risks to solve problems, and spend some time and energy maintaining good relationships.
- There is a willingness to bargain, or make mutual sacrifices in order to avoid impasses.
- People who have strong feelings and desires are encouraged to take responsibility for working constructively until resoulution occurs.

Solutions

What can we do when strong feelings or disagreements turn into personality conflicts, gossip, high tension, alliance-building, and/or impasses? There are a number of specific alternatives suggested by Howard Carlisle[7] and others.

(1) Remove the cause of the problem.

A conflict may exist because someone doesn't have enough information, or a procedure is unfair, or a proposal was made prematurely. Sometimes a person can be moved out of one role and into a less threatening one. Or you may get lucky, and the "problem" resigns.

(2) Avoid the problem, wait it out, or smoothe it over.

While this may be the chicken's way out, there are times when it's best to wait out the storm. Avoiding a conflict may allow it to go away, or it may reduce tension temporarily, but not get to the underlying difficulty.

(3) Cooptation.

Put the critic on an advisory committee. Say, "Let's you and me do this together."

(4) Use a third party.

Ask an objective mediator to facilitate a controlled exchange, and a plan for solving the problem.

(5) Use facilitative messages.

This is my favorite! Joseph Strayhorn's book, Talking It Out, is a little-known guide to effective communication and problem-solving. He gives clear

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[7]Carlisle, Howard M., Management: Concepts and Situations, (Chicago: Science Research Associates, Inc., 1976), pp. 442-443.

examples of facilitative and obstructive messages. The former include the familiar examples of assertive communication, such as "I feel" and "I want" and "I would like" statements, but he includes a broad array of others. They all aim at helping communication to take place.[7]

For example:

Reflections - Telling the other person what you have perceived or heard or imagined the other person to be feeling, so he/she can confirm or deny it. Counselors are notorious for this. For example, "Sounds like that really upset you." "You seem to be angry at me." "I'll bet you were really really relieved when that happened, huh?"

Open-ended Questions like "How do you react to Dean Bean's proposal?" or Specific Questions like "What was it that upset you?"

Agreeing with part or all of a criticism or argument rather than resisting or challenging. "I think you have a point. I may have been premature in calling for your resignation."

Asking for more specifics when criticized - "What did I say that made you feel like committing suicide?"

Bargaining -- "If you stop making sexist jokes, I'll stop making snide remarks about your after shave lotion."

Asking for feedback - "I'd like to know how I'm coming across."

Verbal and nonverbal praise and appreciation - "You did a great job of chairing that committee!"

Listing options and choosing among them - "We could look for more space, or reduce the staff, or rearrange working hours."

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[7]Strayhorn, Joseph M., Jr., Talking It Out, (Champaign Ill.: Research Press Co., 1977).

In most cases, I believe that it is better to deal with interpersonal problems and political conflicts in direct and very rational ways. I try to rehearse a script for myself when I get ready to so some professional assertiveness. It consists of:

An Introduction: "I've been wanting to talk to you about something that concerns me, and since I really value our working relationship, I thought we should get together." This gets their attention.

The Message: "I'm troubled about your saying some negative things about me to others. Two staff members have heard you do it. I'm very confused about it." I own the feelings.

The Request: "I'd like to know what your perceptions are, and I'd like to ask you to come to me with feedback and not to spread criticism." I'm neither angry nor apologetic.

It helps in general sense to work on building your credibility. To cope with college politics, and to take risks in confronting problems, it's important to deal from a position of political strength.

Each of us needs to ask ourselves and others how we are currently viewed within the organization. Who are our allies? Do we need to actively seek out some key people and spend time getting more comfortable? Do we know the informal networks -- who really talks to whom -- as well as the formal lines of authority? Do we have a good reputation for visible achievement, integrity, reliability, loyalty, and dedication? Are we viewed as "essential" - not easily dropped or isolated?

Do we understand the frame of reference held by key people? Do we know what the Trustees, Deans, faculty and students are really sensitive about? Do we nave a healthy balance of work, relaxation, professional development, and friendship? Do we have a picture of the next job we want, and the stepping stones that lead to it?

If we can answer yes to all those, then we are in a good position to cope with conflicts, and we can reach out to more and more people around us to share the power.

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